SCULPTURE BY JOHN CHAMBERLAIN

John Chamberlain's work, dating mainly from the last six years, may not seem particularly advanced in comparison with the work of other American sculptors and may even be called traditional in that it carries the emotional or "romantic" aspects of Abstract Expressionism into the present generation of artists. It is possible to relate his work to this school of painting not only because of its intensely personal character but also because Chamberlain relies on many of the same formal qualities of color and organization.

Early criticism of Chamberlain's work concentrated overmuch on the source of his materials thus neglecting the creative and extremely personal quality of his work. The automobile as a product of contemporary culture or modern design has no importance in this artist's work; in the finished sculpture it has undergone a complete transformation.

For the Futurists the automobile was a symbol of speed and dynamism. This simple or generalized interpretation is no longer possible. The automobile is now part of our complex value system; as a symbol of artistic or moral value it has lost prestige. We have lost faith in its claim as a mechanical wonder. Its power and basic function has been submerged in garishness. Chamberlain reclaims from the scrapped car bodies not those things which recall their former use but only the accidents of form and color.

Once we realize that the source of the materials if incidental, it is possible to examine some of the artist's methods of transforming them into a piece of sculpture. Many of the pieces are combinations of small parts built up into massive entities, extremely complex and tense in quality. Even the smaller works achieve an impressive monumentality in this way. Color, as a formal element, is equally complex and calculated. The deep recessions which occur in many of the works show evidence of careful planning and are ingeniously reinforced with color. The overlapping planes and remarkable polychrome effects derive clearly from the aesthetics of painting. And the forms themselves refer unmistakably to familiar sculptural types: the wall relief with a contrast of surface rhythms and varying depths and projections, the free-standing figure with carefully composed areas of mass and open areas or negative spaces.

Amidst all this evidence of the artist's reliance on the influence of traditional forms and formal qualities, the most original aspect of his sculpture is his ability to create voluminous shapes that seem to challenge the notion of mass as weight. They possess a certain solidity but counteract the effects of their size with a buoyancy and energy that borders on the effervesence of Baroque effects. Just as the essentially formal concept is polarized by the accidental appearance of the materials, the bulk is contradicted by the vitality which charges all the forms.

Above all, however, the essence of Chamberlain's work is the complete transformation of the raw materials so that their origin does not interfere with their function as elements of form and color. This is most noticeable in the small works where the materials are often cut and compressed beyond recognition. In the larger pieces the brilliant color relationships and startling variety of forms create another kind of composing into new forms of reference. These new forms possess new meanings which have nothing to do with their origin, which need not be approached sociologically or appreciated as commentary.

Robert Henning

John Chamberlain was born in Rochester, Indiana, in 1927. He studied at the Art Institute in Chicago and at Black Mountain College in North Carolina. He lives in New York. He has many one-man exhibitions, participated in group shows, and is represented in many important public and private collections.

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Emperor Hudson, polychromed metals, 27 x 30 x 32 inches, 1964, lent by Castelli Gallery.
Hatband, iron and steel, 63 x 42 x 50 inches, 1960, lent by Castelli Gallery
Hunkpapa, iron and steel, 44 x 50 x 14 inches, 1963, lent by Castelli Gallery.
Huzzy, metal, 54 x 33 x 21 inches, 1961, lent by Nelson Gallery - Atkins Museum (Gift of Mrs. Charles F. Buckwalter in memory of Charles F. Buckwalter).
Madame Moon, painted metal, 19 x 29 x 21 inches, 1963-64, lent by Robert A. Rowan.
Mozzo, iron and steel, 52 x 48 x 40 inches, 1962, lent by Castelli Gallery.
Nutcracker, welded steel, 50 x 50 x 35 inches, 1958-59, lent by Allan Stone.
Shortstop, iron and steel, 58 x 44 x 18 inches, 1958-59, lent by Richard Bellamy.

Some of the works in this exhibition are for sale.

For further information please call Extension 331.